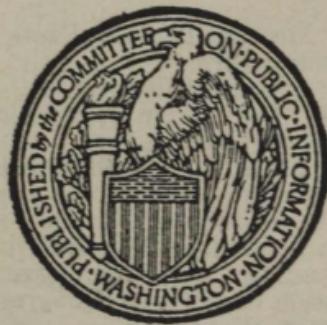


Plain Issues of the War



By

ELIHU ROOT

Ex-Secretary of State of the United States

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'Plain Issues of the War'*

By ELIHU ROOT

Ex-Secretary of State of the United States

THIS is a war of defense. It is perfectly described in the words of the Constitution which established this Nation: "To provide for the common defense," and "To secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."

The national defense demands not merely force, but intelligence. It requires foresight, consideration of the policies and purposes of other nations, understanding of the inevitable or probable consequences of the acts of other nations, judgment as to the time when successful defense may be made, and when it will be too late, and prompt action before it is too late.

By entering this war in April, the United States availed itself of the very last opportunity to defend itself against subjection to German power before it was too late to defend itself successfully.

For many years we have pursued our peaceful course of internal development, protected in a variety of ways. We have been protected by the law of nations to which all civilized Governments have professed

* Part of an address delivered at a war mass meeting in Chicago, September 14, 1917.

their allegiance. So long as we committed no injustice ourselves we could not be attacked without a violation of that law. We were protected by a series of treaties under which all the principal nations of the earth agreed to respect our rights and to maintain friendship with us. We were protected by an extensive system of arbitration created by or consequent upon, the peace conferences at The Hague, and under which all controversies arising under the law and under treaties were to be settled peaceably, by arbitration and not by force. We were protected by the broad expanse of ocean separating us from all great military powers, and by the bold assertion of the Monroe Doctrine, that if any of those powers undertook to overpass the ocean and establish itself upon these western continents, that action would be regarded as dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States, and would call upon us to act in our defense. We were protected by the fact that the policy and the fleet of Great Britain were well known to support the Monroe Doctrine. We were protected by the delicate balance of power in Europe, which made it seem not worth while for any power to engage in a conflict here at the risk of suffering from its rivals there.

All these protections were swept away by the war which began in Europe in 1914. The war was begun by the concerted action of Germany and Austria—the invasion of Serbia by Austria on the east, and the invasion of Luxemburg and Belgium by Germany on the west. Both invasions were in

violation of the law of nations, and in violation of the faith of treaties.

Everybody knew that Russia was bound in good faith to come to the relief of Serbia, that France was bound by treaty to come to the aid of Russia, that England was bound by treaty to come to the aid of Belgium, so that the invasion of these two small States was the beginning of a general European war.

These acts, which have drenched the world with blood, were defended and justified in the bold avowal of the German Government that the interests of the German State were superior to the obligations of law and the faith of treaties; that no law or treaty was binding upon Germany which it was for the interest of Germany to violate.

All pretense of obedience to the law of nations and of respect for solemn promises was thrown off; and in lieu of that system of lawful and moral restraint upon power which Christian civilization has been building up for a century, was reinstated the cynical philosophy of Frederick the Great, the greatest of the Hohenzollerns, who declared:

“If possible, the powers of Europe should be made envious against one another, in order to give occasion for a *coup* when the opportunity arises.”

“If a ruler is obliged to sacrifice his own person for the welfare of his subjects, he is all the more obliged to sacrifice treaty engagements, the continuance of which would be harmful to his country. Is it better that a nation should perish or that a sovereign should break his treaty?”

"Statesmanship can be reduced to three principles:—First, to maintain your power, and, according to circumstances, to extend it. Second, to form an alliance only for your own advantage. Third, to command fear and respect, even in the most disastrous times."

"Do not be ashamed of making interested alliances from which you yourself can derive the whole advantage. Do not make the foolish mistake of not breaking them when you believe your interests require it. . . . Above all, uphold the following maxim:—To despoil your neighbors is to deprive them of the means of injuring you."

"When he is about to conclude a treaty with some foreign power, if a sovereign remembers he is a Christian he is lost."

From 1914 until the present, in a war waged with a revolting barbarity unequaled since the conquests of Genghis Kahn, Germany has violated every rule agreed upon by civilized nations in modern times to mitigate the barbarities of war or to protect the rights of non-combatants and neutrals.

She had no grievance against Belgium, except that Belgium stood upon her admitted rights and refused to break the faith of her treaties by consenting that the neutrality of her territory should be violated to give Germany an avenue for the attack upon France.

The German Kaiser has taken possession of the territory of Belgium and subjected her people to the hard yoke of a brutal soldiery.

He has extorted vast sums from her peaceful cities.

He has burned her towns and battered down her noble churches.

He has stripped the Belgium factories of their machinery, and deprived them of the raw materials of manufacture.

He has carried away her workmen by tens of thousands into slavery, and her women into worse than slavery.

He has slain peaceful non-combatants by the hundred, undeterred by the helplessness of age, of infancy, or of womanhood.

He has done the same in Northern France, in Poland, in Serbia, in Roumania.

In all of these countries women have been outraged by the thousands, by tens of thousands; and who ever heard of a German soldier being punished for rape, or robbery, or murder?

These revolting outrages upon humanity and law are not the casual incidents of war; they are the results of a settled policy of frightfulness answering to the maxim of the Great Frederick to "Command respect through fear."

Why were these things done by Germany? The answer rests upon the accumulated evidence of German acts and German words, so conclusive that no pretence can cover it, no sophistry can disguise it. The answer is, that this war was begun and these crimes against humanity were done because Germany was pursuing the hereditary policy of the Hohenzollerns, and following the instincts of the arrogant military caste which rules Prussia, to grasp the overlordship of the civilized world and establish an empire in

which she should play the rôle of ancient Rome.

They were done because Prussian militarism still pursues the policy of power through conquest, of aggrandizement through force and fear, which in little more than two centuries has brought the puny Mark of Brandenburg, with its million and a half of people, to the control of a vast empire—the greatest armed force of the modern world.

It now appears beyond all possibility of doubt that this war was made by Germany in pursuit of a long and settled purpose. For many years she had been preparing to do exactly what she has done, with a thoroughness, a perfection of plans, and a vastness of provision in men, munitions, and supplies, never before equaled or approached in human history.

She brought on the war when she chose, because she chose, in the belief that she could conquer the earth, nation by nation.

All nations are egotistical, all peoples think most highly of their own qualities, and regard other peoples as inferior; but the egotism of the ruling class in Prussia is beyond all example, and it is active and aggressive. They believe that Germany is entitled to rule the world by virtue of her superiority in all those qualities which they include under the term *Kultur*, and by reason of her power to compel submission by the sword.

That belief does not evaporate in theory. It is translated into action, and this war is the action which results. This belief in

national superiority and the right to assert it everywhere is a tradition from the Great Frederick. It has been instilled into the minds of the German people through all the universities and schools. It has been preached from her pulpits and taught by her philosophers and historians. It has been maintained by her Government, and it will never cease to furnish the motive for the people of Prussia, so long as German power enables the military autocracy of Prussia to act upon it with success.

Plainly, if the power of the German Government is to continue, America can no longer look for protection to the law of nations, or the faith of treaties, or the instincts of humanity, or the restraints of modern civilization.

Plainly, also, if we had stayed out of the war, and Germany had won, there would no longer have been a balance of power in Europe, or a British fleet to support the Monroe Doctrine and protect America.

Does any one indulge in the foolish assumption that Germany would not then have extended her lust for power by conquest, to the American continent? Let him consider what it is for which the nations of Europe have been chiefly contending for centuries past. It has been for colonies. It has been to bring the unoccupied or weakly held spaces of the earth under their flags and their political control, in order to increase their trade and their power. Spain, Holland, Portugal, England, France, have all had their turn, and have covered the earth with their possessions. For thirty years Germany, the last comer,

has been pressing forward with feverish activity the acquisition of stations for her power on every coast and every sea, restive and resentful because she has been obliged to take what others have left.

Europe, Asia, and Africa have been taken up. The Americas alone remain. Here in the vast and undefended spaces of the New World, fraught with potential wealth incalculable, Germany could "find her place in the sun," to use her Emperor's phrase; Germany should find her "liberty of national evolution," to use his phrase again. Every traditional policy, every instinct of predatory Prussia, would urge her into this new field of aggrandizement.

What would prevent? The Monroe Doctrine? Yes. But what is the Monroe Doctrine against a nation which respects only force, unless it can be maintained by force? We already know how the German Government feels about the Monroe Doctrine. Bismarck declared it to be a piece of colossal impudence; and when President Roosevelt interfered to assert the doctrine for the protection of Venezuela, the present Kaiser declared that if he then had a larger navy he would have taken America by the scruff of the neck.

If we had stayed out of the war, and Germany had won, we should have had to defend the Monroe Doctrine by force, or abandon it; and if we abandoned it, there would have been a German naval base in the Caribbean commanding the Panama Canal, depriving us of that strategic line which

unites our eastern and western coasts, and depriving us of the protection which the expanse of ocean once gave. And an America unable or unwilling to protect herself against the establishment of a German naval base in the Caribbean would lie at the mercy of Germany, subject to Germany's orders. America's independence would be gone unless she was ready to fight for it, and her security would henceforth be, not a security of freedom, but only a security purchased by submission.

But if America had stayed out of the war and Germany had won, could we have defended the Monroe Doctrine? Could we have maintained our independence? For an answer to this question consider what we have been doing since the second of April last, when war was declared. Congress has been in continuous session, passing with unprecedented rapidity laws containing grants of power and of money unexampled in our history. The executive establishment has been straining every nerve to prepare for war. The ablest and strongest leaders of industrial activity have been called from all parts of the country to aid the Government. The people of the country have generously responded with noble loyalty and enthusiasm to the call for the surrender of money and of customary rights, and the supply of men, to the service of the country. Nearly half a year has passed, and still we are not ready to fight. I am not blaming the Government. It was inevitable. Preparation for modern war cannot be made briefly or speedily. It requires time, long periods of

time; and the more peaceful and unprepared for war a democracy is, the longer is the time required.

It would have required just as long for America to prepare for war if we had stayed out of this war, and Germany had won, and we had undertaken then to defend the Monroe Doctrine, or to defend our coasts when we had lost the protection of the Monroe Doctrine. Month after month would have passed with no adequate army ready to fight, just as these recent months have passed. But what would Germany have been doing to us in the meantime? How long would it have been before our attempts at preparation would have been stopped by German arms? A country that is forced to defend itself against the aggression of a military autocracy, always prepared for war, must itself be prepared for war beforehand, or it never will have the opportunity to prepare.

The history, the character, the avowed principles of action, the manifest and undisguised purposes of the German autocracy, made it clear and certain that if America stayed out of the Great War, and Germany won, America would forthwith be required to defend herself, and would be unable to defend herself, against the same lust for conquest, the same will to dominate the world, which has made Europe a bloody shambles.

When Germany did actually apply her principles of action to us; when by the invasion of Belgium she had violated the solemn covenant she had made with us to observe the law of neutrality established for the pro-

tection of peaceful States; when she had arrogantly demanded that American commerce should surrender its lawful right of passage upon the high seas under penalty of destruction; when she had sunk American ships and sent to their death hundreds of American citizens, peaceful men, women, and children; when the *Gulfflight* and the *Falaba* and the *Persia* and the *Arabic* and the *Sussex* and the *Lusitania* had been torpedoed without warning, in contempt of law and of humanity; when the German embassy at Washington had been found to be the headquarters of a vast conspiracy of corruption within our country, inciting sedition and concealing infernal machines in the cargoes of our ships, and blowing up our factories with the workmen laboring in them; and when the Government of Germany had been discovered attempting to incite Mexico and Japan to form a league with her to attack us, and to bring about a dismemberment of our territory; then the question presented to the American people was not what shall be done regarding each of these specific aggressions taken by itself, but what shall be done by America to defend her commerce, her territory, her citizens, her independence, her liberty, her life as a nation, against the continuance of assaults already begun by that mighty and conscienceless power which has swept aside every restraint and every principle of Christian civilization, and is seeking to force upon a subjugated world the dark and cruel rule of a barbarous past. The question was, How shall peaceful and unprepared and liberty-loving America save

herself from subjection to the military power of Germany?

There was but one possible answer. There was but one chance for rescue, and that was to act at once, while the other democracies of the world were still maintaining their liberty against the oppressor; to prepare at once while the armies and the navies of England and France and Italy and Russia and Roumania were holding down Germany so that she could not attack us while our preparation was but half accomplished; to strike while there were Allies loving freedom like ourselves to strike with us; to do our share to prevent the German Kaiser from acquiring that domination over the world which would have left us without friends to aid us, without preparation, and without the possibility of successful defense.

The instinct of the American democracy which led it to act when it did, arose from a long-delayed and reluctant consciousness, still vague and half-expressed, that this is no ordinary war which the world is waging. It is no conquest for petty policies and profits.

It is a mighty and all-embracing struggle between two conflicting principles of human right and human duty.

It is a conflict between the divine right of kings to govern mankind through armies and nobles, and the right of the peoples of the earth who toil and endure and aspire, to govern themselves by law under justice, and in the freedom of individual manhood.

It is the climax of the supreme struggle between autocracy and democracy. No

nation can stand aside and be free from its effects. The two systems cannot endure together in the same world. If autocracy triumphs, military power—lustful of dominion, supreme in strength, intolerant of human rights, holding itself above the reach of law, superior to morals, to faith, to compassion—will crush out the free democracies of the world. If autocracy is defeated and nations are compelled to recognize the rule of law and of morals, then and then only will democracy be safe.

To this great conflict for human rights and human liberty, America has committed herself. There can be no backward step. There must be either humiliating and degrading submission, or terrible defeat, or glorious victory. It was no human will that brought us to this pass. It was not the President. It was not Congress. It was not the press. It was not any political party. It was not any section or part of our people.

It was the fact that, in the providence of God, the mighty forces that determine the destinies of mankind beyond the control of human purpose, have brought to us the time, the occasion, the necessity, that this peaceful people so long enjoying the blessings of liberty and justice for which their fathers fought and sacrificed, shall again gird themselves for conflict, and with all the forces of manhood nurtured and strengthened by liberty, offer again the sacrifice of possessions and of life itself, that this Nation may still be free, that the mission of American democracy shall not have failed, that the world shall be free.

